SAAC

STRENGTHENING
ACTION AGAINST
CORRUPTION

Report on the Strengthening
Action Against Corruption
(SAAC):

Baseline Assessment Survey

FEBRUARY 2025

www.corruptionwatch.org.za/strengthening-action-against-corruption-saac/
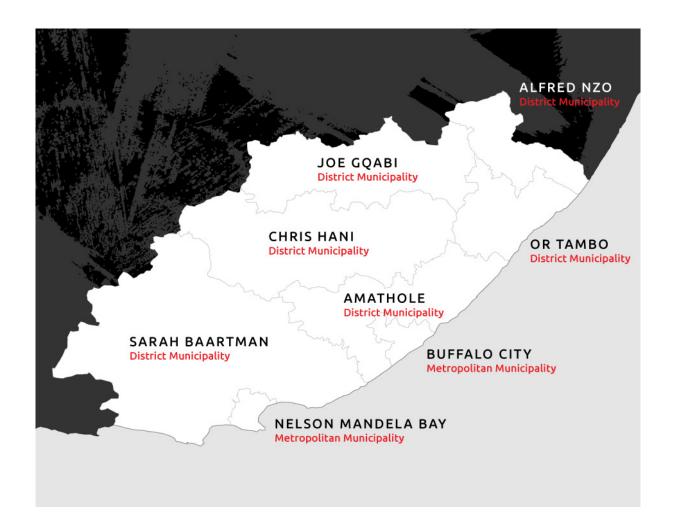
Introduction

Corruption remains one of the most pressing challenges in South Africa, particularly in the Eastern Cape province (ECP), where it undermines governance, deepens socio-economic disparities, and erodes public trust in institutions.

Recognising the need for targeted interventions, the Strengthening Action Against Corruption (SAAC)[1] project was initiated to enhance transparency and democratic accountability by empowering citizens to recognise and report corruption, hold government accountable, advocate for change, and strengthen civic participation, with a particular focus on rural communities. The project seeks to foster grassroots participation in governance, strengthen advocacy at local and national levels, and promote evidence-based approaches to combating corruption.

This baseline assessment survey serves as a foundational step in the SAAC project, providing critical insights into perceptions of corruption, awareness of anti-corruption measures, and understanding of legal frameworks among key stakeholders. Conducted across 15 organisations, including legal advice centres, rural development initiatives, community-based organisations (CBOs) and community advice offices (CAOs), the survey captures the contextual realities and readiness of these groups to address corruption. The findings will inform the development of effective strategies and interventions, ensuring that the SAAC project is both impactful and aligned with the needs of the communities it serves.

By leveraging the unique role of the CBOs, CAOs and other grassroots organisations, this assessment underscores the importance of localised, inclusive approaches to tackling corruption in one of South Africa's most affected provinces.

[1] This project is being implemented by Corruption Watch in collaboration with the Social Change Assistance Trust and Transparency International and is funded by the European Union.

About the project

The SAAC project aims to address corruption and promote transparency in South Africa, particularly in the ECP. Its objectives are to improve democratic accountability and transparency in South Africa by empowering citizens towards active citizenry in the fight against corruption. The specific objectives include enhancing the role of rural communities in governance, accountability, and transparency in the ECP, and improving advocacy at local and national levels by using knowledge and evidence gathered in rural communities to fight corruption.

Context

The ECP faces critical corruption challenges, prompting the development of the SAAC project. It has the highest unauthorised expenditure among provinces, as reported by the Auditor-General for 2019-2020.[2] Local governance is marred by mismanagement, irregular contracts, and widespread lack of accountability, with over half of the province's 39 municipalities under investigation by the Directorate for Priority Crimes Investigations or Hawks in 2022.[3] The state, including institutions such as the Hawks and national departments such as Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), has struggled to effectively combat corruption, while whistle-blowers face severe consequences such as intimidation, fear, and job loss, further deterring efforts to expose misconduct.

Corruption in the ECP has severe socio-economic impacts, deepening poverty, unemployment, and under-development. Rural areas face some of South Africa's highest poverty rates, exacerbated by resource misallocation, poor infrastructure, and service delivery failures. Youth unemployment is particularly dire, with limited opportunities for education and work. Women and girls in rural communities are disproportionately affected, facing systemic inequalities and heightened vulnerability.[4] Corruption also undermines fair business practices, deterring investments, fostering impunity, and eroding public trust in institutions.[5] These challenges are rooted in the apartheid-era legacy of divided governance and compounded by state capture and nepotism, which continue to weaken accountability and governance structures.[6]

Prior to the SAAC project, anti-corruption efforts in South Africa, including the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) 2020-2030, advocated for a whole-of-society approach to address corruption.[7] However, rural areas like the ECP were largely excluded from these efforts. Reports from organisations such as Corruption Watch[8] revealed a sharp rise in corruption cases within ECP municipalities, underscoring the urgent need for focused, grassroots-level interventions to address corruption and its localised impacts.

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[2] Auditor-General of South Africa (2020), Annual Report 2019-2020, Auditor-General of South Africa, Pretoria.

[3] Hawks (2022), Annual Report 2022, Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, Pretoria.

[4] Auditor-General of South Africa (2020), General Report on National and Provincial Audit Outcomes, Auditor-General of South Africa, Pretoria

[5] Corruption Watch (2021), Annual Report 2021, Corruption Watch, Johannesburg.

[6] South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) (2022), The State of South Africa's Youth, SAIRR, Johannesburg.

[7] South African Government. (2020). National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2020-2030. Retrieved from https://www.gov.za

[8] Corruption Watch, Corruption in Eastern Cape municipalities: A report on local government corruption in the Eastern Cape Province (2022). Available at: https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/eastern-cape-drowning-in-despair-yet-officials-turn-a-blind-eye

About the CAOs/ CBOs

The CAOs/CBOs were chosen as key partners in the SAAC project owing to their deep connection to rural communities.

Their role in addressing local challenges, and their ability to mobilise marginalised populations effectively. Operated by local residents, CAOs/CBOs are embedded in the social fabric of the ECP, providing them with a unique understanding of community dynamics and needs. The terms CAOs and CBOs are used interchangeably, depending on the type of organisation operating in a given area. Their proximity to vulnerable groups allows them to engage meaningfully with citizens and address governance issues. Leveraging their long-standing partnership with the Social Change Assistance Trust, which has supported 48 CAOs/CBOs across five provinces, including 25 in the ECP, the project identified experienced organisations committed to social justice and accountability. A transparent selection process was conducted, emphasising their capacity to combat corruption and implement effective localised strategies.[9]

CAOs/CBOs were chosen for their critical role in fighting corruption at the grassroots level. These offices have consistently highlighted frustrations with poor governance and corruption, demonstrating their readiness to act. With experience in organising campaigns, facilitating workshops, and engaging local governments, CAOs/CBOs act as credible intermediaries between communities and authorities. Their ability to provide education on rights, governance, and anti-corruption mechanisms aligns with the SAAC project's goal of fostering transparency and accountability. Additionally, the project addressed resource gaps by providing CAOs/CBOs with capacity-building workshops, financial support, and digital tools to enhance their anti-corruption efforts.

Partnering with CAOs/CBOs serves as a cornerstone of the SAAC project, amplifying its impact by leveraging their grassroots reach and established trust within communities. This collaboration not only ensures meaningful engagement but also fosters long-term sustainability in combating corruption, particularly through inclusive approaches that prioritise marginalised groups. Together, the SAAC project and CAOs/CBOs drive systemic change, laying the groundwork for a more accountable and transparent local governance framework.

[9] Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT). (n.d.). Supporting Community Advice Offices (CAOs) in South Africa. Retrieved from https://www.scat.org.za

The baseline assessment

To strengthen the SAAC project's foundation, the baseline assessment explores perceptions of corruption, awareness of anti-corruption strategies, and familiarity with legal frameworks, among 15 organisations across South Africa.

This study, encompassing legal advice centres, rural development initiatives, and CBOs/CAOs, provides critical insights to inform targeted interventions and measure progress.

The findings reveal a unanimous recognition of corruption as an ethical issue, with common forms such as bribery, fraud, and nepotism reported. Respondents emphasised its devastating impact on communities, including poor service delivery and exacerbated inequality. A lack of accountability, financial greed, and exclusion from the economy were identified as root causes, while government anti-corruption efforts were deemed insufficient. Furthermore, gaps in reporting mechanisms, whistle-blower protections, and law enforcement feedback hinder effective action.

To address these challenges, recommendations include enhanced training, stronger government collaboration with local organisations, and improved efficiency in law enforcement responses. These measures aim to bridge knowledge gaps, bolster trust in oversight systems, and empower communities to combat corruption effectively.

1. Understanding of corruption

IS CORRUPTION AN ETHICAL PROBLEM?

100% of respondents agreed that corruption is an ethical issue, indicating a strong consensus on its moral implications.

DEFINITION OF CORRUPTION

All respondents agreed that corruption involves dishonesty or criminal offenses, specifically the abuse of authority for personal gain.

FORMS OF CORRUPTION

The common forms identified include bribery (69.2%), embezzlement, fraud, nepotism, money laundering, extortion, kickbacks, and conflicts of interest.

WITNESSING CORRUPTION

60% of respondents reported witnessing corruption in their local communities. Common cases involved bribery, selling of public goods (such as RDP houses), and irregular awarding of tenders.

IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

Corruption has a significant impact on communities, with 92.3% of respondents citing effects such as poor service delivery, high unemployment, and stalled development projects.

2. Causes and consequences of corruption

CAUSES OF CORRUPTION

The primary causes identified are financial greed, exclusion from the economy, and a lack of accountability. Respondents emphasised the connection between financial incentives and the desire for lavish lifestyles.

CONSEQUENCES

Respondents strongly agreed (93.3%) that corruption has severe consequences on individuals' careers, leading to legal issues, limited growth opportunities, and ethical challenges.

WORSENING INEQUALITY

All respondents believe that corruption exacerbates inequality, poverty, and unemployment, especially in vulnerable communities.

3. Effects on government and service delivery

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Respondents highlighted that corruption erodes trust in the government. Key concerns include compromised service delivery, economic stagnation, and the inability to attract foreign investors.

MUNICIPAL CORRUPTION

Corruption at the municipal level is seen as widespread, perpetrated by officials, councillors, and businesspeople. Respondents noted that anti-corruption laws are often disregarded, leading to incomplete service delivery projects.

GOVERNMENT'S ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS

Most respondents (84.6%) believe that the South African government is not doing enough to combat corruption. There is widespread scepticism about the effectiveness of current anti-corruption measures, including limited prosecutions of individuals in power.

4. Organisational awareness and actions

FAMILIARITY WITH ANTI-CORRUPTION S TRATEGIES

While 60% of respondents are familiar with the NACS 2020-2030, fewer organisations are aware of other relevant frameworks, such as the **Local Government Anti-Corruption Strategy** and the **Public Service Anti-Corruption Strategy.its moral implications.**

REPORTING CORRUPTION

Although 100% of respondents are aware that failure to report corruption is a criminal offense, 90.9% were unaware that cases should be reported to the Hawks. This indicates a gap in understanding the proper reporting channels.

WHISTLE-BLOWING

Less than half (46.2%) of respondents knew that whistle-blowers are protected by law. The importance of whistle-blowing was well understood, but there is a lack of awareness around the legal protections in place for whistle-blowers.

5. Legal frameworks and oversight

FAMILIARITY WITH ANTI-CORRUPTION LAWS

A large majority of respondents were familiar with critical anti-corruption laws such as the Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act (92.9%) and the Financial Intelligence Centre Act (100%). However, only 30.8% were familiar with the South African Police Service Act and its provisions for police conduct.

KNOWLEDGE OF OVERSIGHT REPORTS

78.6% of organisations are aware of government oversight reports from entities like the Auditor-General of South Africa and the Public Protector. However, 21.4% of respondents were unfamiliar with these reports, pointing to a gap in knowledge dissemination.

6. Recommendations for enhancing anti-corruption efforts

INCREASED TRAINING AND AWARENESS

Only 84.6% of respondents reported attending anti-corruption training. Expanding training programs will improve awareness, especially regarding whistle-blowing protections, reporting channels, and the role of law enforcement.

STRENGTHENING GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION

Government engagement with local organisations needs improvement. While 100% of organisations had initiated anti-corruption actions in their communities, many feel that government support is lacking.

IMPROVING LAW ENFORCEMENT EFFICIENCY

There is a need to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies to ensure they effectively respond to reports of corruption. Only 33.3% of organisations received feedback from the police on reported cases, which discourages future reporting.

Conclusion

The SAAC project's baseline assessment survey provides a sobering yet insightful overview of the systemic and far-reaching impacts of corruption in South Africa, particularly in the Eastern Cape province. The survey underscores the urgency of addressing corruption as both an ethical and governance crisis that erodes public trust, deepens socio-economic disparities, and compromises service delivery.

While the findings highlight significant gaps in awareness, reporting mechanisms, and law enforcement effectiveness, they also underscore the resilience and commitment of grassroots organisations, particularly the CAOs and CBOs, to act as catalysts for change. These organisations are uniquely positioned to foster transparency, accountability, and participation, especially among marginalised groups such as women, youth, and rural populations.

Moving forward, the SAAC project must prioritise targeted interventions informed by these findings. Key areas include increasing anti-corruption training, strengthening collaboration between government and local organisations, and enhancing the capacity of law enforcement to respond effectively to corruption reports. By leveraging the insights and partnerships cultivated through this assessment, the SAAC project has the potential to advance a culture of accountability, empower communities, and lay the groundwork for systemic transformation in combating corruption across South Africa.

Ultimately, the success of the SAAC initiative lies in its ability to bridge the gap between policy frameworks and grassroots realities, fostering sustainable, community-driven solutions to one of South Africa's most pressing challenges.

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